



Photo: Tale Hendnes/Dansen's house

[Grace Tabea Tenga](#)– March 14, 2025

## Masterful dreamscape

Choreographer Mamela Nyamza enchants us into an imaginative dream world in *the Hatched Ensemble* at Dansens Hus

The choreography *Hatched* was first an autobiographical solo performance by Mamela Nyamza and premiered in 2007. In it, she processed the grief over the death of her mother, inspired by the dying swan in the ballet of all ballets, *Swan Lake*. Now it has been adapted for a company of 12 performers and has had the word *ensemble* added to the title. With a background from Gugulethu in Cape Town, Nyamza has seen South Africa through major political upheavals. The country is characterized by an archetypal African deep culture, while European cultural expressions have a particularly strong position. The fronts have been steep since Dutch colonialism in 1652, and they became particularly acute during the racial segregation of apartheid from 1948 to 1994. Nyamza's dance technique is based on both of these cultural influences, with a background in everything from locally rooted dance and traditional styles such as gumboot to classical ballet, jazz technique and modern dance.

### Peasant romance

Figures of animals and peasant motifs in white metal wire are scattered across the stage. We see an ox, a rooster, a tree and a miniature windmill. The 12 performers sit with their backs turned to us. They are dressed in white, loose and light skirts. The most striking thing about the skirts is that they are covered with several protruding hangers. They stick straight out of

the skirt like the quills of a hedgehog. The hangers also find their place around the neck like a chain. Together with the bare chest, the chain is reminiscent of the annual transition ritual [Mkhosi woMhlanga](#) where young women dance with reeds in their hands for the king of the Zulu people. The Zulu are South Africa's largest ethnic group and make up 24% of the population. The transition ritual is also used to discuss social challenges, including HIV and teenage pregnancy. The performers wear white pointe shoes that match the skirt, and they have clear makeup with bright red lips and white eyeshadow. With outstretched arms, they gracefully drag themselves across the stage floor. The ballet's classic port-de-bras, outstretched arm positions and hand movements, are in focus. One of the performers carries a bundle of [protea plants](#), South Africa's national flower, and distributes them to her fellow performers. She has a clear leadership authority, and when she sings operatic alone, she develops a kind of nurturing, Mother Earth energy.

## Tableau vivant

All the dancers have individual hairstyles: cornrows, braids, afros and dreadlocks. When they lift the “livestock”, they form a kind of moving silhouette. Such a tableaux vivant, staging living people as if they were paintings, spreads a pleasant space for thought in the hall. It appears as a peasant romantic ballet sequence. Foremost in the memory is the ballet classic Giselle, where a peasant girl falls in love with a nobleman and dies of a broken heart because they cannot marry across the strict social boundaries. Here one gets a clear feeling that the scene creates a rural idyll, it expresses a dream of leaving urbanity in favor of a more down-to-earth lifestyle. It appears as a dreamscape of a pre-colonial order. The actors break out in harmonious singing in canon, a signature in South African culture. The vocals spread across the hall, supported by the multi-instrumentalist Given Mphago. The music washes over the audience with its excellent combination of harmonious song sequences and ballet deconstructed in the South African style. My partner whispers “goosebumps!” at the same second as me.

## With the spikes out

A dancer stands up and begins to balance on her toes. This is done without accompaniment, so you can hear how hard she steps on the block at the bottom of her pointe shoes. Traditionally, dancers in southern Africa often have rattles placed around their ankles. In Nyamza’s own choreography and costume creation, the entire leg becomes the rattle as the hangers hit each other in a quivering shake. The “spikes” are clearly visible. The dancers assume a common formation as a united troupe. Forget the long tai chi-like poses, here there is more direct contact with us in the audience, they approach the edge of the stage and us with quick movements, eye contact and clear intention. They attempt to do an arabesque and reach for a longer line hanging above them. One dancer manages to grab it by sitting on the shoulders of a fellow dancer. Then they hang their pointe shoes on the line and assume a far more frightening position. They balance red tulle dresses on their heads and then hang them on the line. Then they stick their heads through the red dresses hanging there with ugly grimaces on their faces. They scream words. Possibly names, because I think I hear a “zandile” or something close to it. They throw off the hangers and spread out across the stage floor. Even the calm the mother figure conveys through the opera aria "Eternal Source of Divine Light" cannot overshadow the screams and the other chaos that unfolds. The strong red color does not give the same idyllic associations as the white skirts. Is it the uniform of communism or the radical left-wing party Economic Freedom Fighters that the red color evokes associations with, or is it the [red umbrella](#) that internationally symbolizes solidarity with sex workers? On the website of Dansens Hus I read that Nyamza has contributed to the

work against homophobic hate crimes, especially so-called [corrective rapes](#) . It is sexual assault against women and non-binary people that violates heteronormative gender and sexuality ideals. In Nyamza's hometown of Cape Town, lesbian women like herself are particularly vulnerable. According to queer organizations, an average of 10 women are raped every week, most of them in underprivileged areas like Gugulethu. [“We are famous for being a country with beautiful legislation that cannot be implemented,”](#) said then-Equality Commissioner Yvette Abrahams. South Africa is still the only African country that allows same-sex marriage.

## Protest steps

It goes from live music on stage to recorded music, which is a mix of South African country and pop songs. The feet move in unison and tightly. The head is in step with the beat and sticks its head back and forth like a chicken. The ballet shoes have been removed for full contact with the ground and are now used to hit the floor in time with the music. With its bent knees, rapid movements of the feet and lifting the foot on the toes, it resembles the dance kutsamba from the neighboring country, the microstate and absolute monarchy Eswatini, formerly called Swaziland. There, the media is subject to strict state control. ([Here](#) you can see a princess doing the kutsamba dance a little over a week ago on Women's Day). Using the dance of power to protest, as I experience the company doing here, seems like a well-placed political protest. Especially in a time when former democracies are becoming more authoritarian, the direction appears relevant and poignant. The performance as a whole was experienced as a kind of cleansing ritual, a disconnection from daily geopolitical doomsday scenarios. *Hatched Ensemble* was experienced as being transported into a kind of miniature version of a village with a closeness to the earth and the local community.